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## English For Academic Purposes Needs of Research Assistants: A Qualitative Needs Analysis in a Nursing Department

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### Abstract

The present study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by documenting the EAP needs of the research assistants of Nursing in a public Turkish university. The study was of a qualitative nature and data was collected by means of an open-ended questionnaire, whose questions were based on Hutchinson & Waters's (1987) framework to identify the target needs of language learners. The participants of the study were 8 research assistants working for the Nursing department of a public university in Turkey, who volunteered to participate in the study. For the analysis of data, the statements of the participants were coded according to their themes and topics. The findings of the study revealed that the participants were in need of improving their academic speaking and writing skills within the context of Nursing in order to perform better in writing research articles and giving presentations in international conferences.

**Key words:** English for Academic Purposes, Needs Analysis, English for Nursing

### Introduction

Following the Oil Crisis in 1980's, Teaching English as a Second / Foreign Language has shifted its aim towards meeting the individual, institutional or contextual needs of language learners, which is nowadays referred to as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). According to Dudley – Evans (1998), ESP aims to cover explicit learning needs utilizing discipline-specific methodology and activities with a special focus on the grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre of the discipline at hand. In this respect, the language needs of the academic community have necessitated the treatment of English language with particular respect to academic needs, which resulted in the emergence of the term English for Academic Purposes (EAP). EAP is a specific area within the domain of ESP and it is defined by Flowerdew & Peacock and Jordan in Hyland (2006) as the teaching of English in order to aid the learner in researching or studying in English. According to Hyland (2006), EAP has two subbranches, English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), which refers to the activities, forms and skills that could be necessary for all academic fields of study, and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), which deals with the language and skills that are related to a particular field of study, focusing on the field-specific areas. As seen in the definitions, the concept of EAP covers most of the needs related to the English language within academic contexts, from generic skills to specialization areas. Considering also the status of English as an academic lingua franca (Mauranen, 2012), it comes out naturally that those who are involved in the academia by being a learner, teacher or researcher within an academic field of study are in need of a sufficient command of English language regarding both EGAP and ESAP and this necessitates the formal identification of their language learning needs.

A well-documented way to identify the needs of language learners within any context is the analysis of the target needs, which attempts to discover the context in which the language to be learned is/will be used by the learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In more comprehensive terms, target needs analysis is concerned with the identification of the roles to be adopted by the language learner in the target community and the knowledge and skills required to perform this role. In this respect, the requirements of language use, the actualization of communicative events and the identification of the genres functionally in use in the target context are integral endeavours within the context of target needs analysis (Hyland, 2006). To put it succinctly, the analysis of the target needs involves finding out what the learners will do with the language.

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Even though language needs analysis studies regarding the EAP needs of research assistants seem to be rather scarce within the Turkish context, EAP appears to be one of the problematic aspects of being a research assistant in Turkey. For instance, in their quantitative study with 350 research assistants, Bakioğlu and Yaman (2004) conclude that a large part of their sample believes that incompetence in English is among the major problems in professional development. Similarly, in a mixed method study, Poyraz (2013) reveals research assistants' beliefs that professional perfection requires competence in a foreign language. She also adds that foreign language skills appear to be among the barriers to publishing research studies. Related to the problematic nature of foreign language competence for research assistants in Turkey, Doğan (2013) discovers that 64 out of a sample of 150 academic people regard themselves to be insufficient in English language. Çinemre (2014) confirms Doğan's (2013) findings in a more field-specific quantitative study with 171 research assistants of theology in Turkey, in which many participants state that they feel insufficient in terms of English language skills. In a qualitative study conducted by Örucü and Şimşek (2011), the results of content analysis disclose that academic people encounter foreign language related problems in their professional lives. Considering the findings of these studies, it can be said that multiple studies within the Turkish context point at the need to have an adequate command of English language, reporting it as a problem and a barrier in the professional lives of research assistants.

As seen in the relevant literature, having a good command of EGAP and ESAP is a requirement for those who work within the academia and the Target Needs Analysis framework proposed by Hutchinson & Waters (1987) appears to be a functional way of identifying the language-related target needs of academic staff, among whom are research assistants. However, the literature appears to indicate a gap with respect to the formal documentation of the target needs of research assistants as academic staff. In this respect, the present study aims to reveal the target needs of the research assistants working at the Nursing department of a public university in Turkey.

## **The Context**

Within the Turkish context, research assistants are required to pass several English exams for various reasons, which makes the command of English a legal necessity in addition to research purposes. Briefly, they need English for the following reasons:

### *Master's / Doctoral Studies*

The candidates to enrol in Master's or Doctoral studies are required to document that they have obtained minimum score set by a related institution, which means without passing the national or university-specific English exams, the candidates cannot apply for the graduate programmes (i.e. Hacettepe University, 2013; İstanbul University, 2012).

### *Research / Publication Purposes*

As research assistants in any field, those who work in the field of Medical Sciences are expected to carry out research studies and publish their work in academic journals or present them in academic conferences. Naturally, this brings the need to possess a certain command of EAP, especially for the international journals or conferences. Moreover, the fact that not all research studies in the field of Medical Sciences are translated into Turkish makes it a natural requirement for research assistants to keep up with the current developments in the field. Lastly, in the applications of research assistants for tenure-track positions, publications are converted to *academic points* according to their types and most Turkish universities have standard prerequisites for 'minimum academic points' in job applications.

### *Academic Promotion*

Although it is a rather extended need for research assistants, passing either the foreign language exam organized by the university that is applied to or one of the national foreign language exams organized by the Student Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM) is a prerequisite for the applicants who want to become faculty members (Higher Education Council, 1982). Academic Promotion for research assistants in Turkey is also

closely linked to the ‘academic points’ mentioned in the previous subsection since the demonstration of foreign language knowledge is among the requirements of promotion.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As seen in the literature and documents, English is both a professional and a legal requirement for research assistants in Turkey, which naturally encompasses the research assistants of Nursing departments, too. In addition, the literature written in Turkey shows that this requirement is one of the problematic areas in the professional lives of research assistants. For this reason, it comes out as a necessity to identify the specific academic language needs of those who hold academic positions. In this regard, this study intends to reveal the subjective accounts of the participants as to the reasons why they need to learn English / improve their English skills as well as, how, where, when and with whom they believe they are going to use English. Furthermore, the study aims to disclose the specific content areas that the participants feel they should learn.

### **Method**

Since the present study attempted to reveal the subjective accounts of research assistants in terms of EAP needs within a rather local context, a qualitative methodology was preferred. According to Dörnyei (2007), qualitative research designs are used in order to understand natural contexts, subjective opinions and personal feelings within a typically small group of participants. To this end, the qualitative researcher begins the research process by collecting data by means of observations, interviews, documents or audio-visual materials and then, the data is grouped into categories, themes and patterns for the purpose of making sense of the meaning that a group of participants hold with respect to a problem (Creswell, 2014). Since the study aimed at revealing the subjective perceptions of the participants within the context of a Nursing department regarding their EAP needs, a qualitative research design was considered suitable for the purposes of the study.

To meet the aims of the study, the following research question was formulated:

1. What are the target EAP needs of the participants?

The study took place in the Nursing Department of a public university in Turkey. The participants of the study were 8 research assistants working for the aforementioned department, who volunteered to participate in the study. 1 of the participants was male and 7 of them were female. 7 of the participants continued their Master’s studies while 1 participant had a doctoral degree at the time the study was conducted. All of the participants had National Foreign Language Exam (YDS) scores from different years, for this reason, the most recent scores of theirs were asked within the context of the study. According to the self-reports of the participants, 3 of them had YDS scores between 80-89, 2 of them had scores between 70-79 and 2 participants had YDS scores between 60-69. 1 participant had a YDS score between 50-59. 6 of the participants had attended an English course provided within the framework of Teaching Staff Training Program (ÖYP) for 6 months, each month having 120 hours of teaching for Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Skills along with Grammar teaching. 2 participants had not attended any language course during their research assistantship.

The qualitative data for the study was collected through an open-ended questionnaire. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the term ‘Target Needs’, which is the basis of the research question in this study, refers to the necessities, lacks and wants of language learners as in what they need to know, what kind of knowledge they lack and what they want to know in order to function effectively in their target situation. In this respect, the Target Situation Analysis framework of Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 59), which aims at identifying the target needs of learners, was used as the basis of the questionnaire. On this basis, the following questions were asked to the participants:

1. Why do you think you need to learn / improve your English?
2. How do you think you use / will be using English (Writing, reading, academic, informal, etc.)?
3. Which academic field is your main focus in using English?
4. With whom do you use / will you be using English (native/non-native speakers, experts, colleagues, etc.)?
5. Where do you think you use / will be using English (office, hotel, meetings, abroad, etc.)?
6. When / How often do you use / will you be using English?

For the trustworthiness of qualitative data, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four standards as credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability, which can be respectively achieved by means of a prolonged engagement of the researcher with the participants of the research, presentation of raw data for confirmation, provision of a thick description for sufficient contextual information and confirming the stability of findings over time and across researchers. In this respect, the credibility of the data was believed to be sufficient by the researcher since the engagement of the researcher with the participants had been prolonged due to working for the same institution, which would give the participants enough confidence to allow the researcher to study the context. To increase confirmability, extracts from the raw data were presented so that the findings could be compared to the raw data. Moreover, a thick description in the form of a detailed contextual account of legal and academic status of research assistants in relation to foreign language learning were provided in the initial section of the study to increase the transferability of the results to other contexts. The thick description was backed by research studies from different contexts (i.e. research assistants of theology) in order to assist in transferability. Lastly, the dependability of the data across researchers was confirmed by asking a researcher to categorize 30% of the coded quotations. The calculation of the Cohen's Kappa Coefficient for Intercoder Reliability suggested excellent agreement between two coders ( $K = .91, p < .001$ ). Taking these into account, the data collected within the context of the study was concluded to be trustworthy.

The data was analysed through the categorization of the responses. Firstly, the responses, according to the questions, were categorized under the following headings:

- a. Purpose
- b. Medium / Channel / Text Type
- c. Content Area
- d. Interaction
- e. Setting / Context
- f. Time / Frequency
- g. Requests / Suggestions

Once the data had been categorized under these headings, subheadings were created, based on the content of the responses. Then, the categories were organized and tabulated to reach conclusions.

As a final point to consider, it should be noted that the third person feminine subject pronoun was the only pronoun used in the study to refer to each participant in order to preserve anonymity, as there was only one male participant in the study.

## Results

The data collected within the context of the present study was analysed through qualitative means of coding. The findings extracted from participants' responses were presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Purposes for Learning English / Improving their English Skills

Purposes	Participants
Work (Academic)	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Education	RA4, RA6, RA7, RA8
Social	RA3, RA7
Exams	RA4
Leisure Activities	RA1

The purposes of the participants for learning English, as seen in Table 1, predominantly concentrated on work, which typically requires academic language skills. Data analysis showed that all participants focused on professional purposes for learning English or improving their English skills. Moreover, four participants stated that they intended to use English during their graduate or postgraduate education. Two participants indicated that they needed English for social purposes such as travelling, too. One participant said that she needed to improve her English skills to increase her YDS score, while another one mentioned that watching TV shows without subtitles is a purpose of hers to improve English skills, commenting as, "*Although it is not an academic need, I believe it is related to English skills*", indicating a perceived parallelism between EAP needs and EGP needs. To elaborate on her purpose, RA1 commented, "*I want to improve my English skills to avoid needing proofreading [for academic articles]. I also want to feel more confident during academic presentations*", suggesting both psychological and external reasons for her desire to improve her proficiency level. Having a

different perspective, RA5 stated that she needed to improve her English skills since she found it “*difficult to translate articles*”, referring to both her own and others’ articles, showing that the participant had translation from L1 in her perceived processes of reading or writing.

Table 2. How the Participants Used English

Mediums / Channels / Text Types	Participants
Giving Academic Presentations	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Reading Academic Articles	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Writing Academic Articles	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Telephone Conversations	RA1, RA7
Lecturing	RA1, RA7
Face-to-Face Conversations	RA7
Translation	RA5

How the participants used English language were tabulated in Table 2 with reference to the mediums, channels and text types. It can be observed in Table 2 that all the participants used English language for giving academic presentations along with reading and writing academic articles. As for the channels of communication in English, RA1 and RA7 indicated that they used English in both telephone and face-to-face conversations. Furthermore, lecturing in English and translation were among the ways participants used English language. Exemplifying the need to improve her writing skills, RA8 said, “*When we have a look at one another’s articles or abstracts, our sentences look shorter than they are supposed to be*”, referring to the lack of sentence connectors and discourse markers in their written texts. RA1 and RA7 also noted that they need to lecture in English during their post-doc studies and when they attend Erasmus Academic Staff Mobility Program. RA7 concluded the section by saying “*In all the steps you take and all parts of academic life, English is a necessity*”, referring to the perceived need to have a sufficient command of English language within the academia.

Table 3. Participants' Content Areas for Using English

Content Areas	Participants
Nursing (General)	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Surgical Nursing	RA1, RA4, RA7
Pain Studies	RA1
Environmental Studies	RA1
EMT Management	RA1
Nursing Management	RA8
Public Health Nursing	RA8

Regarding the content areas that the participants use English, the findings showed that all the participants used English language within general Nursing context. However, RA1, RA4 and RA7 reported that they needed English particularly for Surgical Nursing. Moreover, RA1 stated that she needed English for the fields of Pain Studies, Environmental Studies, and EMT Management, in line with her research interests. RA8, again referring to her research interests, indicated that she needs English language for the fields of Nursing Management and Public Health Nursing.

Table 4. With whom the Participants Interact

Interaction Groups	Participants
Colleagues	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Experts	RA2, RA3, RA8
Conference Acquaintances	RA1, RA8
Speakers of EFL/ESL	RA7
Native Speakers of English	RA8
Friends (Online)	RA1

As a response to the fourth question of the interview, all of the participants articulated that they interact mostly with colleagues (both native and foreign). On that matter, RA2, RA3 and RA8 said that they also interacted with the experts of the field. Two participants, RA1 and RA8 indicated that they made acquaintances during conferences, so they interacted with them, too. RA7 pointed out that she interacted with speakers of English as a second or foreign language and RA8 stated that she interacted with native speakers of English as well. One participant, RA1, added that she had memberships in several websites focusing on language learning, therefore, she interacted with other members, too.

Table 5. The Setting / Context in which English is Used

Setting / Context	Participants
Academic Conference	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Office	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Abroad	RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5
Own Country	RA2, RA3, RA4
Classroom	RA1
Social Media (Academic Groups)	RA1

The fifth question of the interview intended to reveal the setting or context in which the participants used English language. Regarding this, all participants conveyed that they used English in academic conferences for research presentations and their offices for reading and writing academic articles. Four participants expressed that they used English abroad and three participants said that they used English in their own countries. One of those participants, RA3 said she would need English in academic conferences both abroad and in her own country “*to listen to and give academic presentations*”, revealing a perceived need in terms of both receptive and productive skills. RA1, referring to the Erasmus Academic Staff Mobility Program, stated that she used English within classroom context, too. In addition, she added that she also needed English “*on social media to follow academic groups and pages*”, indicating that the web-based participation in the academic community was also perceived to have necessitated adequate proficiency in English.

Table 6. Participants' Frequency of Using English

Frequency	Participant
Every day for Writing / Reading	RA1, RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7, RA8
Once or Twice a Year for Conferences	RA1, RA5, RA6, RA8

As shown in Table 6, the participants' responses to the question which asked them how often they used English language were quite similar in content. All the participants set forth that they used English language on a daily basis for reading and writing academic articles. As for conference presentations, four participants specified that they needed English once and twice a year. RA8 expressed that she needed to utilize English language “*5 to 10 days a year for speaking*”, referring to the conferences she attended for research presentations. In brief, all participants were found to make use of English on a daily basis for reading and writing and a few participants needed English to give presentations in academic conferences.

Table 7. Participants' Requests and Suggestions

Request / Suggestion	Participant
Language Course	RA2, RA3, RA4, RA5, RA6, RA7
Lecturing in English	RA8
Receiving Lectures in English	RA8
Organizing International Conferences	RA8

The last section of the interview asked the participants if they had any requests or suggestions regarding EAP. In this section, six participants stated that they would have liked to attend an EAP course. Three of these six participants added that the course they requested should have had a speaking focus and R7 suggested a language course, saying “*If only there was an English course, on condition that its focus was practical use [of English]*”, also pointing at the need for production-based teaching/learning. Apart from a language course, RA8 suggested some courses be lectured in English and international conferences be organized for the sake of being more engaged in the language. Upon the completion of the questionnaire, RA6 added, “*Academic English has always been a problem but it has not been solved as of yet*”, indicating the longitudinal perception of English as a problem to be solved.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to discover the EAP needs of the research assistants working for a Nursing department in Turkey. The findings indicated that the participants had a general consensus on their need for EAP for work and education purposes. Furthermore, all participants stated that they needed to use English language for giving academic presentations, reading and writing academic articles. Similarly, all participants agreed that they should improve their English in terms of general topics related to nursing. As for the settings where English was / would be used, all participants seemed to be in unison with one another in that academic conferences for

research presentations and their offices for reading and writing articles were the places in which they used English language with colleagues and experts most commonly. Moreover, using English language on a daily basis for academic reading and writing purposes was another issue on which all participants agreed. Lastly, it was seen that a majority of the participants demanded an EAP course be given to improve the aforementioned skills.

The findings of the study appear to be in line with other findings produced within the Turkish context with respect to the language needs of research assistants. For instance, Doğan's (2013) and Çinemre's (2014) findings indicate that the research assistants in their studies perceive themselves to be insufficient in terms of their proficiency level in English language. Similarly, the research assistants who participated in the present study request a language course to be given within the institution they work for, indicating a perception of low competence in English. In addition, both Bakioğlu and Yaman's (2004) and Örucü and Şimşek's (2011) findings show that their participants define English as a problem in the professional lives of research assistants, which corroborates the findings of the present study in which the participants define English in a similar manner. Finally, Poyraz's (2013) findings, which show that research assistants are aware of English as a requirement within the academia are in line with the findings of the present study which indicate that the participants perceive English as a professional necessity. Even though the research assistants mentioned in the reviewed studies are from various academic backgrounds in terms of their specializations, all studies, including the present study, seem to point at the need to increase the level of proficiency in English.

Another significant finding of this study was that all participants reported the need to improve their language skills along with requesting an EAP course to excel in their academic studies and education as also required by the legal context (Hacettepe University, 2013; İstanbul University, 2012) although most of them had attended an intensive English course and they already had sufficient YDS scores for academic promotion (Higher Education Council, 1982). This may be indicating a practical problem in that the paper-based nature of YDS is not adequate in terms of testing language skills, since it does not include writing or speaking sections, which are the areas that the participants reported a need to improve. Apparently, having a YDS score enough to receive graduate-level education or work within the body of a university does not result in an increase in writing or speaking-related self-efficacy as the reports of perceived low competence among the participants with respect to writing academic articles or giving presentations suggest. For this reason, having a relatively high score in YDS may not mean being efficacious with respect to academic speaking and writing among the participants.

Taking into account the EAP needs of the participants, a language course, which was also requested by the participants, can be proposed to the Continuing Education Centre of the institution in order to improve the academic writing and speaking skills of the participants. Since the participants explicitly stated their need to improve the mentioned skills for research purposes, an EGAP or ESAP programme which focuses on productive skills may prove useful for the participants by providing them with knowledge and skills particular to their academic context, serving their EAP needs and gradually increasing their self-efficacy levels with respect to writing academic articles and giving academic presentations.

As for the limitations of the study, it should be noted that the inferences made in this study are limited to the subjective accounts of the participants in which they state their needs to improve their academic writing and speaking skills. However, standardized means of testing these skills can also be utilized in order to reveal what they can and cannot achieve in terms of EAP, which would also provide useful insights to the EAP proficiency levels of the participants. Furthermore, the data collected in this study is limited to a single university in Turkey. In that respect, further study is recommended in order to reach a conclusion regarding the EAP needs of the research assistants in Nursing departments on a regional or national level.

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